
ARTICLES

Pop Politics: Online Parody Videos, Intertextuality, and Political Participation

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Editors' Note: As this issue is released, Americans are voting for a new president. The long primary and campaign seasons marked the definitive arrival of video sharing sites on the electoral scene, with many of the candidates' best and worst moments reaching the electorate via YouTube. The editors asked Chuck Tryon, assistant professor of Film and Media Studies at Fayetteville State University, author of the forthcoming *Reinventing Cinema: Movies in the Age of Digital Convergence*, and frequent reviewer and analyst of political videos at his blog The Chutry Experiment (<http://chutry.wordherders.net/wp>), to reflect on the place of some of these videos in the election.

As someone who is interested in the potential of new communications technologies such as Web video in fostering new forms of political participation, I have been fascinated by the uses of popular culture as a means of offering commentary on the political campaigns. In particular, I am interested in the ways in which video producers have mobilized images from popular culture as a form of intertextual parody of both political punditry and campaign advertising. These videos can range from amateur remixes that edit together two or more political ads and popular culture texts to professional comedy teams that produce short video parodies of campaign ads, creating what Jonathan Gray (2006) has described in a different context as a kind of "critical intertextuality," in which intertextual references are used to comment on or criticize the original text. Significantly, many of these ads challenge traditional notions of citizenship in that some parodies are produced by non-U.S. citizens or people too young to vote in the elections. While this use of parody might be treated on TV shows such as *Hardball* as mere "sideshow," these videos represent a crucial site where interested participants can negotiate the meanings of campaign narratives in a fairly sophisticated way. To examine the role of parody in the 2008 election, I will look at the responses to two of the more controversial or memorable campaign advertisements, Hillary Clinton's "3AM" and John McCain's "Celeb."

Because the results of an election inevitably rewrite the narrative of a campaign, I write this essay three months before election day without the awareness of how it will be read through the lens of hindsight. In fact, I am acutely aware of my own tendency to judge campaign strategies on the basis of the vicissitudes of public opinion as reflected in daily tracking polls. However, despite this reservation, I find it valuable to assess how political parody videos operate within the larger nexus of overlapping, and often competing, campaign narratives.

My emphasis on the use of parody in these videos derives from the recognition that parody can be used to challenge the authority of political powerbrokers, whether pundits or campaign workers, in shaping political discourse. It is now accepted as common sense that the broadcast media is failing in its obligation to serve the public interest. Media observers such as John Nichols and Robert McChesney (2005) and Eric Alterman (2007) have highlighted the ways in which news departments either seem more interested in entertaining viewers than informing them or seem wedded to specific “narratives” that define candidates in imprecise ways. Although Alterman generally sees campaign narratives as obscuring the candidates’ positions on relevant issues, there are ways in which narratives can provide voters with a means of making sense of a candidate, of fitting discrete details into something more comprehensible (see Hendler, 2008). More crucially, these narratives are constantly being negotiated not only by the two major candidates but also by other third-party candidates, journalists, and bloggers, potentially making campaign narratives at least somewhat fluid.

In this context, parody offers a useful technique for challenging campaign rhetoric in particular. In his discussion of film parody, Dan Harries observes that parody can serve as “a demonstration of the constructed nature of any cultural product” (2000, p. 125). Mock campaign advertisements, in particular, treat campaign advertisements as genres in order to question the accepted narratives associated with a given campaign, providing viewers with a kind of meta-commentary on the workings of political discourse. Harries identifies a number of techniques, such as reiteration, inversion, misdirection, and inversion, which are common to film parodies. Because many of the parodists model themselves after movie and TV comedies such as *Saturday Night Live*, these techniques often find their way into the online videos. Most parodies reiterate elements of the original video if only to create a point of departure from the original, but the primary techniques are inversion, in which the video maker inverts the meaning of the original by adding new elements, and exaggeration, in which the campaign tactics are taken to the extreme in order to illustrate how they are manipulative. As a result, successful parodies can, in fact, model the critical skills needed to analyze the arguments and imagery associated with a given campaign. As Henry Jenkins argues, parodies “invite audience skepticism” toward the news and “pose questions rather than offering answers” (2006, p. 227). By this logic, parody videos can serve a pedagogical function, helping viewers to become more attentive and critical readers of cultural texts.

While many of these mock ads utilize parody as a form of critique or commentary, the humor in many of them relies upon intertextual references to other aspects of popular culture, including movies, TV shows, and other ads to create a new meaning. One of the more famous cases of intertextual commentary, Phil De Vellis’s “Vote Different,” for example, remixed a Hillary Clinton Web video with the Apple 1984 Super Bowl commercial to depict Clinton as a kind of “Big Brother” figure who would take away individual rights. Although the video is not explicitly a parody, it did use the techniques of critical intertextuality to challenge the narrative of Hillary Clinton’s inevitability as the Democratic nominee. Understanding the video not only required specific knowledge of Clinton’s public image but also of the original Apple advertisement itself,

illustrating the extent to which these new intertextual models of political commentary may rely on a relatively informed viewer. In this manner, political parodies, much like the film parodies they emulate, require some form of “insider knowledge” in order for the audience to interpret them properly (Harries 2002, p. 283).

One of the more compelling examples of political parody videos appeared in the responses to Hillary Clinton’s “3 AM” advertisement. In the original ad, we see a young, blonde-headed girl sleeping in a suburban, middle-class home, the low-key lighting suggesting not only nightfall but also a sense of danger, while an ominous voice-over warns that “it’s 3 AM and the phone in the White House is ringing. Something is happening in the world.” While the ad may imply that Clinton is more prepared to handle the threats of international terrorism, the visual imagery recalls advertisements for home security systems, suggesting a fear of domestic crime instead. Although a number of critics read the video as encoding a “racist sub-message” (see Patterson, 2008), the ad’s more general use of the politics of fear is undeniable. In response to this use of fear, the comedy troupe The Public Service Administration (PSA) produced a video, “Bass Motives,” which opened with an identical sequence featuring a suburban house and an ominous voice-over; however, rather than a shot of a young girl, we see an adult male comedian playing the role of the child who is awakened by the sound of the voice-over. A pan across the room reveals that the supposedly invisible announcer is, in fact, in the room, revealing through this technique the constructedness of fear ads. We then see the father of the child explaining the role of “ominous narrators” in appealing to these fears. In addition, the use of an adult male in the role of the child helps to literalize the ways in which Americans are infantilized by political arguments based solely on fear.

Similarly, Stranahan’s “Hillary: Children at 3:02 AM” mocks the use of fear tactics by the Clinton campaign, in his case through exaggeration. Like the original “3 AM” ad, Stranahan uses stock footage of sleeping children combined with a voice-over describing a late night phone call; however, in his video, the voice-over departs from the normal script by making literal the idea that Obama is the threat to the depicted children: “Now it’s 3:02 AM and you know why that phone call is coming to the White House? Because Barack Obama has hired people to break into your house, turn your children into Muslims [and] deny them health care.” Like the PSA ad, Stranahan’s video points to the constructed nature of political advertising by calling attention to the conventions of the form. At the same time, “3:02” also challenges a number of the rumors that have been perpetuated about Obama, including the idea that he is secretly a Muslim. Thus, in both responses to the “3 AM” ad, common parody techniques, such as inversion and exaggeration, are used to articulate a relatively pointed political message.

While these “3 AM” parodies generally commented directly on the original text, other videos often introduced other popular culture texts to intervene in the politics of images. Many of these issues reemerged in August 2008 when Republican nominee John McCain launched “Celeb,” which quickly became notorious for its use of imagery from popular culture to criticize Obama. “Celeb” visually compared Barack Obama to young, white Hollywood starlets Paris Hilton and Britney Spears. “Celeb” illustrates the principle of intertextual commentary perfectly, as the McCain campaign sought to turn Obama’s charismatic appeal into a negative by depicting him as a vacuous celebrity. In the controversial opening sequence of the advertisement, the soundtrack features audio of an audience chanting Obama’s name over an overhead shot of the audience for Obama’s Berlin speech. Brief shots of raised hands only serve to highlight the idea of Obama as a star while a female voice-over tells us, “He’s the biggest celebrity in the world.”

Then a series of quick cuts accentuated by the sound of photographer's flash bulbs produce a series of incongruous shots of Paris Hilton and Britney Spears posing for photographs appear before a slow dissolve to Obama himself, seemingly underscoring the notion of celebrity while connecting the three public figures through parallel editing. Although the advertisement's explicit meaning suggests that Obama is a vacuous celebrity compared to the more seasoned McCain, a number of pundits, including *New York Times* columnist Bob Herbert, pointed out that the ad was "designed to exploit the hostility, anxiety, and resentment of the many white Americans who are still freakishly hung up on the idea of black men rising above their station and becoming sexually involved with white women" (Herbert, 2008; see also Robinson, 2008). Herbert went on to point out that after the shots of Obama, Paris, and Spears, the video strangely included shots of the Leaning Tower of Pisa and the Victory Tower in Berlin, speculating that the use of such phallic imagery may have been intentional. Although Herbert's reading did not go unchallenged, the ad provoked quite a bit of controversy, if only because of its depiction of Obama as vacuous and its use of young, blonde women to reinforce that perception.

Within days, a number of parody videos appeared on YouTube and other video-sharing sites, many of which sought to challenge the racial fantasies depicted in the ad while others sought to flip the script, showing McCain as old and out-of-touch, jealous of Obama's international stature. The prominent political comedy troupe Barely Political edited together footage from a Britney Spears interview from CNN with McCain speeches, calling attention to the echoes between Spears' support for the war in Iraq and McCain's promotion of President Bush's policies, in essence using both Bush and Britney to overturn the original McCain narrative and, potentially, the oft-repeated depiction of McCain as a "maverick" who has bucked both his party and the President. Another, "Obama Celeb & White Women," repeatedly crosscut between McCain's ad and a scene from *Blazing Saddles* in which Bart (Cleavon Little), the town's African-American sheriff, asks, "Where are the white women at?" In this sense, the latter video uses *Blazing Saddles'* satire to comment, rather pointedly, on the techniques used in the McCain ad. In both cases, intertextual references are used to criticize the "Celeb" advertisement, requiring that the viewer have at least some familiarity with both political and popular culture texts to make the argument effective.

Perhaps the most widely known parody of the McCain commercial was produced by Paris Hilton herself, responding to the depiction of her as a shallow, self-absorbed celebrity through a mixture of self-parody and surprisingly pointed, albeit self-serving, critique. Hilton picked up on a number of other Web parodies by inverting the meaning of the original video. Like most parodies, the Hilton video cited the structure of the original while recasting the video to turn McCain into "the oldest celebrity in the world" before crosscutting between a publicity photograph of the actresses from *The Golden Girls*, a shot of news anchor Larry King rubbing his eyes, and McCain speaking on the campaign trail. Hilton then treats McCain's appropriation of her image with the sarcasm it deserves, feigning a misunderstanding of the commercial's depiction of her by saying, "Thanks for the endorsement, white-haired dude." The ad culminates with Hilton reciting a carefully scripted centrist energy policy before concluding, "See you at the debates, bitches." While Hilton's video hardly offers a solution for the current energy crisis, it helped to contextualize the McCain campaign's tactics as childish and trivial.

However, Hilton's video also illustrates one of the limits of political parodies. Because of Hilton's star status, her video was viewed more than four million times during its first 20 hours on the Web and likely several million other times on cable news shows such as *Hardball* and *Countdown with Keith Olbermann*, while other videos, such as the *Blazing Saddles* parody, may

only receive a few hundred views. In this sense, some of the parodies that offer critiques that are more likely to challenge the status quo may receive less attention than those videos that reinforce existing narratives. Yet the complaints about the original video seem to have been heard by the McCain campaign. In a follow-up to the original “Celeb” ad, Obama was still being described in terms of his status as a star. Conspicuously absent, however, were any shots of Spears or Hilton.

I have described a number of these parody videos in detail in order to emphasize the semiotic complexity through which they criticize and comment on campaign rhetoric. While I have described the videos as persuasive texts, I don’t mean to suggest that they will necessarily convince citizens to vote for or against a given candidate. Instead, their primary purpose is more pedagogical, sometimes informing viewers of the candidates’ policies but more often reminding us of the ways in which campaign narratives and candidate images are constructed. These videos can offer a new form of media literacy that promotes a healthy skepticism toward campaign narratives, reminding us not to listen to the “ominous narrators” anymore.

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